



Arabic, Portuguese, French, English

The map above, found via Google Images, was labelled “Business Languages in Africa”. There are no indigenous African languages mentioned. All are exotic languages, except that Ethiopia’s language is referred to as “Other”. Kiswahili is ignored.

Tactics

What one can note is two things. The first is immediate and tactical, pointing to practical necessity in politics, as much as in business.

This is the practical necessity for South Africa, if it is to have an effective political relationship with the rest of the continent, to

have good translation into English from French, Arabic and Portuguese, and vice versa.

This means a cadre force of translators who are not politically neutral, but who are editors in their own right, and capable of discriminating and selecting from the available material.

Similarly, these translators need to be at work translating South African material into those other languages, and publishing it by all available means.

So that the net result is a continuous two-way flow of ideas and dialogue between SA and the rest of the continent.

Strategy

The second matter is to note the dominance of the languages of previous colonists, and to put in place measures that will inexorably work to turn this situation around.

What are these measures?

As South Africans, we have to begin at home. We have to have dictionaries in all of our languages. That is, monolingual dictionaries. The movement towards an inter-lingual communication begins with the consolidation of the individual languages. Otherwise, the colonisers' languages will continue to dominate, as a strong mediator between weak indigenous languages.

With that groundwork of dictionaries in place, then a superstructure of translation has to be created. Even if it is technically sophisticated, it will still be labour-intensive. That is to say, output will be in direct proportion to human effort applied. This is the paradox of IT. The more it becomes frictionless by computerisation, the more direct is the relationship between human input and practical output.

That means that there need to be plenty of linguists. Modern language departments at universities need to grow enormously. The number of academics needs to increase or even multiply, as well as the numbers of students.

Africans need to own the language business of Africa. The map has to look different. The whole concept has to change.

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